

Tribal Seafood Marketing

Introduction

Western Washington treaty tribal fishermen are getting one-half of the price that they were receiving for their salmon catches 25 years ago, and they are spending twice as much to get it.

Fifteen years ago, tribal fishermen could sell river-caught chinook for about \$2 per pound to any one of a number of fish buyers. Nowadays, the number of fish buyers has decreased to one or two and the price hovers around 25 to 30 cents a pound.

In just a decade, farm-raised salmon – primarily from Chile, Norway and Canada – have captured half of the world's salmon market. Tribal fishermen just can't compete with farmed salmon, which in some cases are sold by producers for less than their production costs.

A glutted salmon market and year-round supply of farmed salmon has resulted in lower prices for consumers, who in the last two years have made salmon the most popular fish in the United States, not counting canned tuna. The average consumption of salmon by Americans has nearly doubled in the past five years.

Tribal salmon fishermen are unable to compete with farmed salmon producers for a number of reasons: Low production costs and inexpensive air transport have made fresh farmed salmon available year-round. Tribally harvested salmon are available fresh for only about six months per year.

Farmed salmon are uniform in size, color, texture and overall quality, making the product attractive to supermarkets and restaurants. Natural salmon harvested by tribal fishermen vary in all of those factors.



Nisqually tribal fishermen offload their catch to a buyer on the Nisqually River. *Photo: T. Meyer*

Although the foreign salmon farming issue has definitely hastened the decline of the natural salmon fishery, other factors have been in place that would have had the same effect. A lack of infrastructure improvements in the way natural salmon is processed and shipped has been a long-term problem. In the ever-growing global marketplace, the natural salmon industry has been unable to retool and reinvest in facilities that address marketing factors in the world economy. The inability for the natural salmon industry to reinvent and market itself to survive in the global economy has been predicted for years. Only now is the natural salmon industry waking up to the fact that they must change the way they do business to survive.

Tribes Examine Marketing Needs

Tribes in western Washington have also realized that they must change the way they conduct fisheries to be more friendly to the changing marketplace. Quality control will be key to marketing tribally caught salmon. The ability to network and start cooperatives among tribal groups will be important to sustaining fisheries. In short, tribes must radically change the way they capture and handle fish after it is caught, as the market is demanding a fresher, better quality product.

Tribes are taking a broad look at the marketing issue: from over-the-bank sales by individual fishermen to nationwide distribution of western Washington tribally harvested salmon – and everything in between.

Tribes know there is no single solution. All agree, however, that federal assistance is needed. Farmers receive billions in federal subsidies each year. Western Washington treaty tribes, who are also food producers, receive nothing to aid their efforts.

Tribes have been working diligently to restore weak wild salmon runs and repair damaged habitat, all of which have been impacted by non-Indian activities. Over the past 20 years, tribes voluntarily reduced their harvests by up to 80 percent to help recover weak wild salmon stocks.

Many of these efforts – combined with good ocean conditions for the past two years – resulted in record returns of salmon to many areas. While these returns in no way mean that salmon recovery efforts are completed, they demonstrate that the tribal commitment to the resource is returning dividends.

Unfortunately, at a time when salmon returns have been better than they have in decades, tribal fishermen can find no market for their catch.

Assistance Needed For Marketing Other Species

Tribes require assistance to market other species as well. In recent years, shellfish and bottomfish harvests by tribal fishermen have been on the rise. Tribal harvest of geoduck clams, shrimp and Dungeness crab have increased in Puget Sound following the 1994 Rafeedie Ruling that reaffirmed the tribes' treaty shellfish harvest rights. Off the Washington coast, tribes have increased their harvest of crab, as well as halibut and some bottomfish species.

Today, nearly every species of fish and shellfish harvested by the treaty tribes are currently being farmed, or will be in the near future. Norway, for example, is pouring millions of dollars into research and development of methods to farm Atlantic cod. It is expected that, by the end of the decade, the amount of farmed cod will be the same as that harvested at sea. This pressure creates yet another challenge for the tribes in their quest to make all of their fisheries commercially viable. In many cases, shellfish harvesting has replaced salmon fishing as a primary source of income for some tribal members. As tribes struggle to regain a market for their salmon, they must also be aware of market pressures on shellfish resources. Tribes must begin now to market other fish species as well as shellfish in the face of increasing pressure from farmed products.

Tribal Marketing Study

In 2003, a tribal salmon marketing study was completed. The study was commissioned to provide options for tribes and begin a process that could lead to a marketing strategy aimed at improving prices and distribution for tribally caught salmon. The Research Group, a Corvallis, Ore., based company, was hired to conduct the study.

The study found that tribal fishermen could take immediate steps to take advantage of marketing opportunities. Those steps include:

- ◆ A review of the data reporting system to ensure that all the pertinent information is collected on harvesters and trading channels. Total disclosure is necessary to improve management, understand product development potentials and design financial assistance programs.
- ◆ Infrastructure requirements for ice buying and transportation facilities at remote locations, allowing for universal services available to all treaty fishermen.

- ◆ A description of each tribe's fishing industry characteristics and organization. This would include discussing any advantages that would come from participating in an inter-tribal cooperative marketing program.
- ◆ Training tribal fishermen how to properly handle salmon. This would include surveying some existing harvesters to determine needed vessel and gear upgrades and describe how those needs could be met.
- ◆ Establishing a closer relationship with buyers and processors. Letting them know what to expect before the fishing season begins can help buyers and processors line up their markets and will protect tribes from further declining prices.
- ◆ A training program to assist tribal fishermen in marketing their catch directly to the consumer.
- ◆ Discovering niche markets — such as restaurants — where tribally caught fish could be sold.
- ◆ Producing promotional material about tribal salmon fisheries for buyers, such as processors, restaurants and direct purchase customers. This material would include basic information on species availability and contact information.

Other long-term steps that could be taken include:

- ◆ Identifying and characterizing markets.
- ◆ Creating a quality assurance program. This would establish a minimum standards program for fish, which would be graded at the time of delivery.
- ◆ Establishing formal relationships with existing processors.
- ◆ Creating an advertising campaign based on products that meet the quality assurance program standards and reference wild capture healthiness.

- ◆ Developing an organizational proposal for a marketing program that includes a first year start-up budget and future staff requirements.

In March 2004, tribal fishermen and representatives will attend a Tribal Seafood Marketing Summit, where the findings of the study will be discussed. A recommended course of action also will be put in place to help tribal fishermen begin an effective salmon marketing program. Given the current state of the commercial salmon fishery, tribal fishermen must begin to make major changes in how they capture, handle, process and market their catch if treaty fisheries are to remain economically viable.

Measures tribes must take to improve the value of their catch include the following:

- ◆ Quality Control: Fishermen must invest in their fishing vessels to increase the quality of their catch. This includes modifying vessels to carry ice and creating space on board for bleeding their catch as soon as possible after harvest.
- ◆ Organization: A fishermen's organization or cooperative to market tribal catch could be beneficial. This would enable fishermen to centralize their product in a particular location and make it available over a longer period of time. This would benefit any marketing plan tribal fishermen might develop.
- ◆ Value-Added: Smoked fish, vacuum packaging and ready-to-eat packaging are trends for fisheries products. Tribal marketing efforts must address these types of products.
- ◆ Fish Marketing vs. Fisheries Management: As marketing plans are moved forward, business and government must cooperate on how the fisheries are currently managed. Any changes in fisheries management practices that can help marketing efforts must be explored, provided they do not threaten the conservation of the resource.

- ◆ **Consumer Education:** There is an untapped market for fisheries products, especially in Hispanic communities, and in Midwestern states where little seafood is consumed. The public must be better educated to the benefits of eating seafood, as well as the ease with which it can be prepared.
- ◆ **Fishermen education:** Tribal fishermen must be educated to the facts of today's marketplace, and must learn new handling practices to deliver a high quality product that can compete in both local and global markets.

Tribal Marketing Funding Needs

After adopting a marketing plan, funding will be needed to achieve tribal goals. In particular, it is anticipated that funding will be needed for:

- ◆ **Education and training:** Tribal fishermen and tribal staffs must be educated and trained in marketing processes, product handling and related activities.
- ◆ **Infrastructure:** Tribes must be able to address processing, administrative and all other aspects of starting up a seafood business.
- ◆ **Consultant Services:** Tribes will need assistance to develop marketing and business plans, design and construction of facilities and conduct market research.

- ◆ **Fishery Cooperative Development:** If a tribal organization or group of tribes decides to create a fishery cooperative, funds will be needed to implement the joint venture. After the receipt of start-up funding, tribes would work toward becoming financially self-sustaining.

Conclusion

It is cruelly ironic that the salmon, which has sustained tribes for thousands of years, can no longer provide an adequate source of income on reservations where unemployment runs as high as 80 percent.

With help from the federal government, and through cooperation between tribal fishermen, tribal governments and the industry, tribes can achieve their goal of returning natural salmon to the marketplace.

For More Information

For more information about the natural resource management activities of the treaty Indian tribes in western Washington, contact the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, 6730 Martin Way E., Olympia,